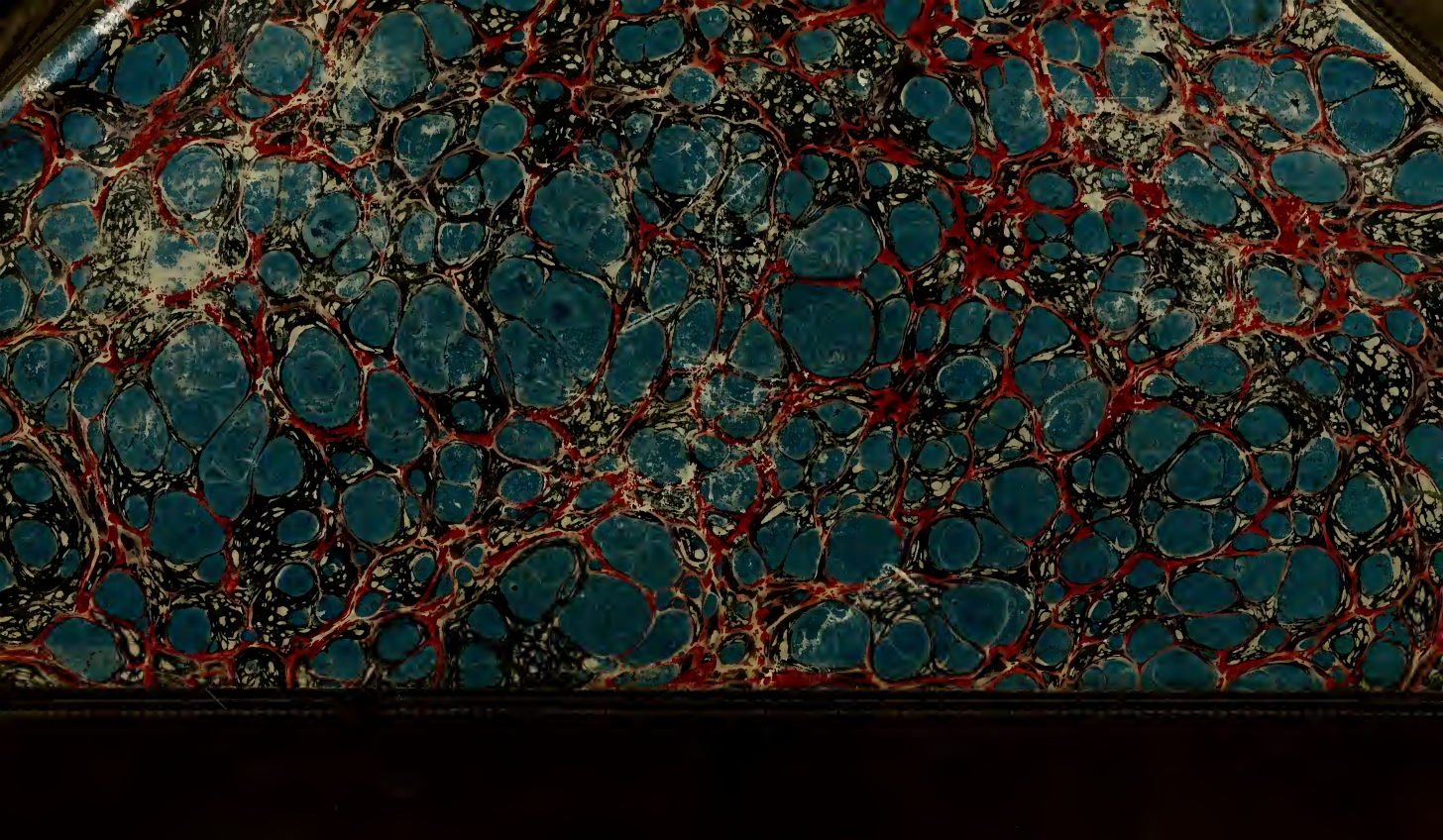

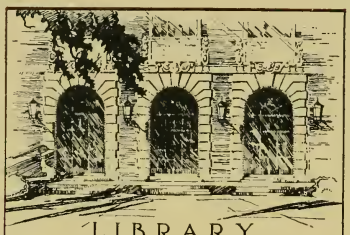

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A DIALOGUE BETWEEN A CLERGYMAN AND A PARISHIONER ON THE PEW SYSTEM.

P. Good morning, Parson; you are just the man I wanted to see.

C. Then I am very glad I happened to call; but what's the matter now, Mr. B.? Did you want me for anything particular?

P. Well, you see, sir, you came down upon us a bit strong last Sunday. We have always had a great respect for you, Mr. A., and there's been a many things changed since you've been here, which we've come round to, as we didn't like to go against our parson, but—it was a little too much for us what you said on Sunday.

C. I suppose I know what you mean. You didn't like what I said about my most earnest wish to see my church open to all classes alike; in short, to do away with all appropriated seats.

P. That's it, sir, that's it. You see, if there's one thing more than another we care for, it is to know where to go to when we go to church.

C. Who do you mean by *we*, Mr. B.?

P. Why, we—all of us, to be sure; we farmers and the gentry, and all the like of us.

C. Well, I should like very much to talk to you about this subject, and try to get to the bottom of it. Tell me first when you say that you, that is, your class, care so much to know where to go to, do you mean that you think the whole congregation is made up of that class?

P. No, sir; how could I mean that? Why there's a hundred or more of labourers and their wives. But there's the free seats on purpose for them.

C. Oh, so you don't think they do care to know where to go to?

P. Well, I don't know as they do; you see, they haven't been used to it as we have. But, for my part, I see no objection to their having their own seats as well as we.

C. Nor I, my friend; and if this most hurtful system, as I think it, is to be kept up, I most earnestly wish the same privilege should be given to poor and rich alike. But there is one little difficulty you have not considered; how are we to make room for them?

P. Why should it take more room than now?

C. I must answer that question by another, Mr. B. Why are the free seats always so much fuller than the appropriated ones?

P. Well, you see, sir, if there are no places kept, people would naturally crowd into them more.

C. But you mean if the seats were appropriated, they would not be allowed to come in?

P. No, of course not; and that's just one reason why we like to have our own seats.

C. But, then, what is to become of those who are kept out?

P. Have seats elsewhere, to be sure.

C. But supposing there's no elsewhere? Don't you see that in giving each family so many sittings, you must allow for the greatest number that

ever attend, and perhaps nine times out of ten that number do not come, so that in each appropriated seat you will generally see at least one or two vacant places; isn't this the fact?

P. Well, that part of the church do look a deal emptier than where the free seats are, there's no denying that, sir; but I never thought of the reason.

C. You see, then, that if we were to appropriate to the poor as well, we should want a much larger church, although it would probably never be filled. But to make the reason of this more clear, I will give you a few examples. To begin with the big house. You know how often that is full of visitors for whom there must be accommodation in the pew, though probably for half the year or more these extra sittings are not required. Then there is Mr. J., with four sons either at school or college, and yet there must be seats ready for them in the holidays. Mr. C. takes his family regularly either to London or to the sea-side, and their seats are consequently vacant for three months at least. Mr. F., as you know, poor fellow, has much sickness in his family, and it is seldom indeed that they can all come. Mr. N. had twelve sittings given him when the appropriations were made, but his daughters have married and three of his sons are now out in life, so there have been five vacancies made in his pew, and yet he doesn't like to have it filled up with strangers. Then, alas, there are the indifferent and careless, who make no regular habit of church-going, and yet would be the first to resent being deprived of their pew, which they consider part of their property, giving them dignity and importance in the place. Besides all these reasons, which apply to any single service, let me ask you, do you see the same congregation at both morning and evening service?

P. No, the gentry come mostly in the morning, and the poor in the evening.

C. Exactly so, and there are consequently whole rows of empty seats every Sunday evening, whose owners will neither enter in themselves, nor suffer others to enter in. And you must see that by mixing up these two classes indiscriminately, we should gain nearly twice as much room. But I need not go on; you must see now what I meant by saying that when seats are appropriated, you must always allow for more than will be actually present.

P. Well, I don't think myself the seats ought to be kept empty; let them be filled up as soon as the service is begun, I say.

C. Better than leaving them empty, certainly. But there is an evil in this; you give your poor people a special inducement to come late.

P. How so?

C. Because they know that if they come in good time, they will be put into the free seats in a remote part of the church; but if they come late, they will be shown into some of the gentry's seats, where they will both see and hear better.

P. Oh, but I would have the free seats just as well placed as the others.

C. That sounds well, but it is difficult to work in practice. There is more reason for this too than appears at first sight, for of course nobody likes to have a fixed seat in a bad part of the church. I know I shouldn't, for one; though if people take their chance one with another, nobody would mind it for an occasional Sunday. So it comes to pass by degrees that the free seats are the least good, just those which people will not have for a permanency. But now tell me, B., what are your chief objections to what is called the free system?

P. Well, sir, I think what we dislike most is the not knowing where to go when we get into church; it makes a man feel shy and awkward to stand about till he is shown into a seat, and then, besides that——

C. Wait a minute. I should like to discuss your objections one by one.

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So now for No. 1. In the first place, I can't help just putting before you what I know you have right feeling enough to grant at once, that if this really does cause you so much discomfort and awkwardness, it is hard to make one particular class (and that, perhaps, the most shamefaced) suffer it, and for others to be let off. But what I wish really to make you understand is, that under ordinary circumstances every regular church-goer might go to the same seat if he preferred it. Don't you see old Betty Smith and Jem Harris, and many others of the poor, always in the same places, although those places are in what are called the free seats? Of course, it might happen that some strangers might unintentionally take them, or that when there was some unusual attraction and the church was crowded, they might be filled; but still as a rule you see them there, don't you?

P. Yes, sir; those that come regular.

C. So that you see the only people who would suffer, if we are to use that word for so very small an annoyance, are those who either are not able, or who do not care to come to church regularly. And you will agree with me that it is more right to make a distinction between those two classes, the regular and the irregular worshippers, than between rich and poor. Besides that, in the case I am now putting, the distinction is one which makes itself, and has not to be drawn by others, which is in itself a great advantage. But now let us have objection No. 2, Mr. B.

P. Stop a bit, sir, please. I'm not such a good hand at arguing as you, and I haven't got my answers ready just yet to all as you have been saying; but still I don't feel quite satisfied. You see, sir, there's another thing; I like to go with my wife and children about me, and not to be scattered all about the church.

C. Why this is No. 2, after all; for this is a different reason from the first one you gave, and I am willing to allow that it is a grave and important one, worthy of consideration. Again I must begin by saying to this, as to all the objections you can possibly urge, that they apply quite as much to the poor as to the rich, and in some cases more. And I go on to say that the remedy is a simple one, as before. Go a little early to church, and you are sure to find room to sit together. Go regularly to church, and you are sure to be able to have the same seats. Of course I don't mean in either case that it would always be so, but it would be the rule and the contrary the exception. Besides, let me ask you, B., when you are going to some concert, or lecture, or entertainment, does this thought trouble you much that you may not all be able to sit together; and are you very unhappy when you find two of your boys in the seat behind, and your eldest daughter in front of you?

P. No, sir; but then I shouldn't think of expecting it there; and a place of public assembly isn't like church.

C. Well now *I* think it is very like, or rather that church is very like a public assembly. I wish with all my soul that people could be got to feel this more. It will take a very long time before we get rid of the private-devotion view which came in with the locked-up boxes in which people could never get higher than the idea of united *family* worship, and not even to that when each member turned round to kneel, and was conscious of no other living creature than an occasional moth disturbed from his comfortable feast on the green baize. Be sure of this, my friend, that the more we feel the church to be a place of public assembly, the more nearly we have got to the right idea of what is meant by *common* prayer. For my part, except for the sake of superintendence and control over one's children, I should make no point of sitting together, but rather enjoy the feeling that the

whole congregation was one family, and that only a small number of the vast family of the multitudes of Christians, all worshipping at that time together, one family before God, of which Christ himself is the head. This is a great thought, and I never worship with so much pleasure and satisfaction as when I can realize it; but I do not expect many to follow me here, and there is much that is very good in the common family feeling. But I repeat that there is a good deal of exaggeration in the ordinary argument that they must all sit or kneel in one *row*, and that you are practically much nearer together when some one is before or behind, or, it may be, just the other side of the passage. Well, now I think it is time for objection No. 3 for I don't doubt you have another.

P. I wish I could think of them all just when I want to. Now, as soon as we have done talking I shall think of lots of things that wouldn't come into my head when I wanted them. There is one thing though, sir, that we do feel to be a great objection, but somehow I feel more ashamed of it than of the others; but you know we don't like—ladies especially don't—to be exposed to having *anybody* sitting next us. Perhaps they are very dirty, or perhaps they are people we don't associate with, and it may be, sometimes, there may have been a little quarrel, you know, sir.

C. A most formidable array of objections here for me to answer! As to the first, I must say I have observed very particularly, and it always seems to me the poor are scrupulously clean, both in their person and dress, when they come to church. As to the quarrels and the not visiting, I think you will at once see that the church is the last place where we could take notice of such things. It may be very disagreeable, but so are always the consequences of our faults; and let me remind you that under the system of appropriations, you are liable to be placed *permanently* next to somebody with whom you are not in pleasant relations, whereas under the free system it would only happen occasionally.

P. Not if I had a pew to myself—for my family at least.

C. No, but I was not speaking of you and your family in particular, who are enough in number to fill a whole pew, but of people in general; and of course it might happen that Mr. and Mrs. E. and Mrs. and Miss F., who have never spoken since Mr. E. said that Mrs. F.'s husband was only "commercial," might be placed by the churchwardens in the same pew (the result of which, by the way, would probably be that one of the two families would cease coming to church altogether, and would revenge themselves by withdrawing their subscriptions from all missionary and other charitable societies!) And here I must add that there are many other evils, such as an offensive manner of responding, or discordant and loud singing, which it is a real injury to any one to be *always* next to, but which could be borne complacently for an occasional Sunday. So that I cannot see that you gain anything by the present system in that respect.

P. Well, but now do you really think that the poor would gain much by the change? I've heard it said that they don't like sitting before their betters, and that the consequence of freeing the church would be that the poor would always choose the worst seats.

C. Well, that seems to me better than *imposing* them upon them, as we practically do at present. But that by the way, for to begin with, I must say I do not believe it would be the case. I think it is very likely that by degrees a habit might be formed of the poor sitting together in one part of the church and the rich in another, by the attraction of like to like that we see run through everything, but in the case of any unusual crowd or pressure they would feel at perfect liberty to take any seat they saw vacant; and I

can only say, from my own experience, that I have constantly seen labourers and their families sitting just in front of their own employers, without apparently being conscious of it. At all events, if churchwardens and their deputies do their duty, they may easily provide against the poor suffering in this way in consequence of their own modesty and good feeling.

P. Why, I don't see what they would have to do then, sir? It would be every one for himself, and first come first served, to my thinking.

C. And not such a bad order of precedence either. But it still would remain the duty of the churchwardens to see that the congregation was properly seated, and to help people to find seats should there be any difficulty about it. And especially they should take measures to provide against the evil of strangers monopolizing the seats to the exclusion of the parishioners, who should always have the precedence. In London and other places, where there are many strangers, this argument has often been used against the free system; but I think, with a little contrivance, it could be remedied. It would be easy for all the parishioners to have some token by which they could be recognized as such, and let them in all cases be first seated. Of course, in the country it is much simpler, for in most cases the parishioners would be known by sight.

P. I don't think the churchwardens would like to do all this work themselves.

C. Probably not, and they would then employ some deputy, as they have hitherto done. But it would not be so well managed as if they did it themselves. And here I cannot help observing that if churchwardens had at all properly fulfilled this part of their duty, many of the evils of the present system of appropriations would be much diminished, though not entirely done away with. But what with indifference, inertness, fear of giving offence to others, and dislike of giving trouble to themselves, our churchwardens in almost all cases depute this part of their office to some well-meaning but inefficient beadle who plods on in the old routine, and perhaps hardly knows that it is against the law to keep seats vacant whose occupiers absent themselves habitually. But this is a large subject, and my time is getting short. Have you anything more to say, Mr. B.?

P. No, sir; only as I hope there isn't much likelihood of any change, for I know we shouldn't like it.

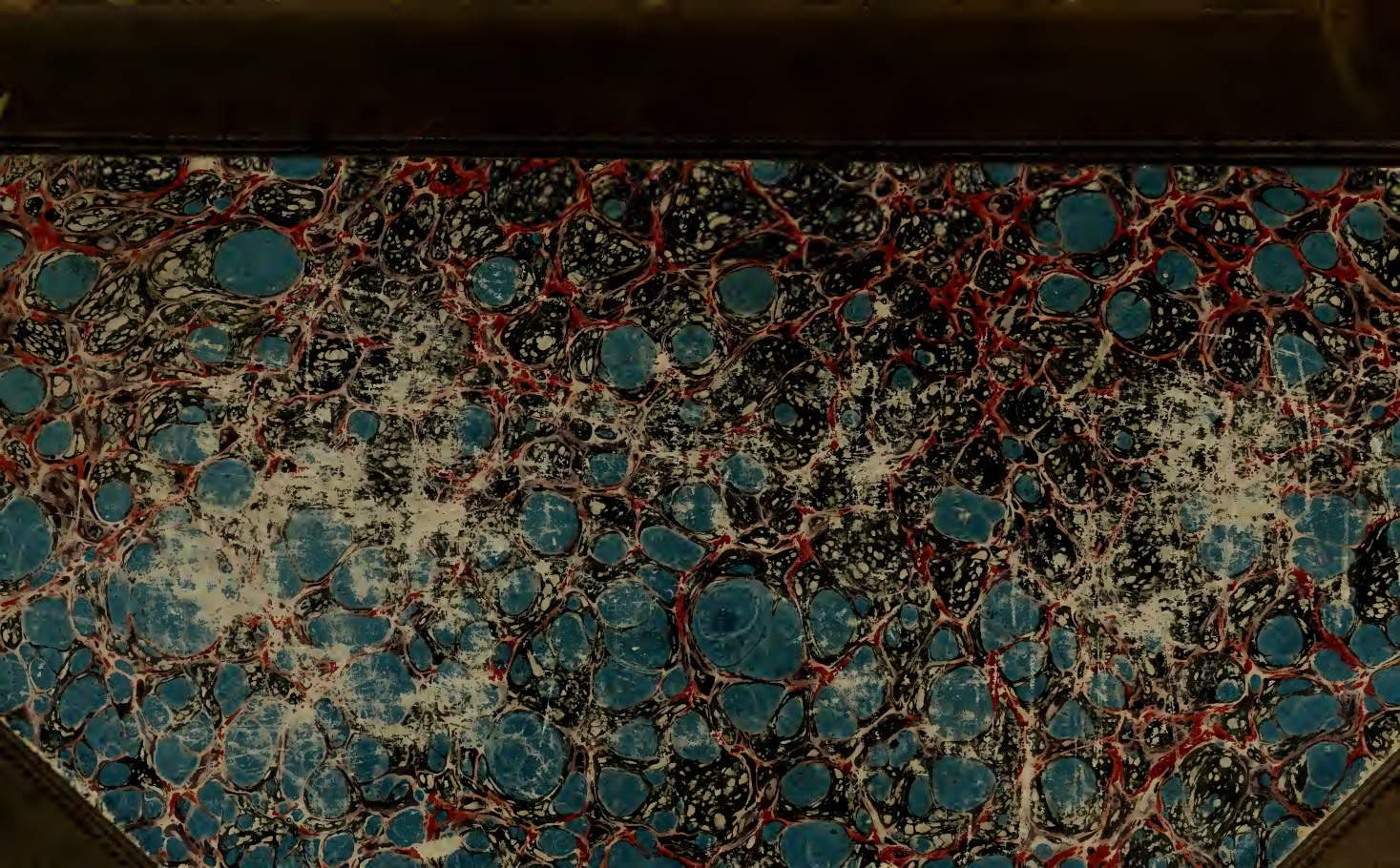
C. You need not be afraid of my making any change, for this simple reason, that I have no power whatever in the matter. I can but endeavour to persuade my parishioners and make them think with me. But before we conclude I must tell you that there is one objection I have been expecting you to put forward, which always seems to me more reasonable than those commonly urged; that is, the having to take books with you to church, instead of leaving them in the pew.

P. Well, what have you got to say to that, Parson? I can't see as you can get over that, with all your arguments.

C. I say it is a difficulty, but I cannot think it a very formidable one; for nobody thinks much of the hardship of carrying books to church when away from home, which I suppose we all do. But I am not sure I have not got a remedy even for this. For my part, I should be glad to see every church furnished with Prayer-books and hymn-books, just as we now see them in cathedrals and college-chapels, and the expense would not be very great. But now let me say, Mr. B., that we must not expect this or any other scheme to be entirely perfect; we can but weigh the disadvantages of one system against the other, taking care to have no false weights or balances arising from our prejudices and customs and selfish advantages, and I think

there can be no doubt with you, or any other sensible and candid man, which side will kick the beam.

P. One word more before you go, sir, please. I should like to hear what are the great evils that you feel so strongly under the present system. You have only mentioned one as yet, that of taking more room than necessary.

C. One word, my good friend! It would take me full another half-hour, and then I shouldn't have exhausted the subject; but I will try and sum up a few of the chief ones. 1st. The preference of one class over another, together with all the heartburnings that ensue from the difficulty of drawing the line between the privileged and unprivileged. 2nd. The driving away of some of the poor altogether from church. Every clergyman, I suppose, knows what it is on questioning some humble parishioner about non-attendance at church to receive for answer, "Well, you see, sir, I don't know where to go; I went one Sunday, and then the beadle came and turned me out of my seat, and I don't like that;" or, sometimes, "I don't see it's any use going when I can't hear, and they take and put me far back in the church and I don't hear a word, so I stays and reads my Bible at home." I say I have known many cases of these and similar objections, and I am perfectly helpless in the matter. 3rd. The impossibility of satisfying people about their seats, and the quarrellings and bickerings and complaints, and envy, hatred, and malice resulting therefrom. 4th. As I have tried to explain, in the course of my conversation, the almost inevitable consequence that the free seats are practically always in the worst places, just those that nobody will have as their own. 5th. The having to provide more church accommodation than is ever really used. These are but the main points feebly sketched out, and touching all parishes alike. But the evils in our large towns are of tenfold magnitude, and result in the total exclusion of the poor, as may be seen by almost every one of the London congregations. God forgive us for what we have done in this matter; it will take us more than one or even two generations before we recover our hold upon those poor of Christ's flock to whom the blessed promise was given, that to *them* should the Gospel be preached,—and we deliberately shut them out. Now we see what we have done, and we call and call in vain, they *will* not come in. But where does the guilt lie? Let us use every means in our power to undo the harm we have done, and this amongst the first and foremost, to open our churches without respect of persons, to make all feel welcome there, to have no *mine* and *thine* in that holy place which is the House of God, and to which He is pleased to invite all with the merciful and loving words: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

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